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THE HEALING OF ORESTES

Was ist es? Leidet der Göttergleiche?
Weh mir! Es haben die Uebermächtigen
Der Heldenbrust grausame Qualen
Mit ehrnen Ketten fest aufgeschmiedet.

—GOETHE, *Iphigenie*, III, 2 (1306–9)

These four lines have been described as the most difficult passage of the play.¹ The everlasting punishment of Tantalus strikes a discordant note in Orestes' vision of peace and reconciliation as he emerges from the state of unconsciousness brought on by his spiritual and physical collapse. His imagination pictures the royal house of Atreus a united and reconciled family. Thyestes and Atreus walk side by side in familiar converse. Agamemnon leads Clytemnestra fondly by the hand. Orestes is himself welcomed into their midst as the long-lost son. But Tantalus, the progenitor of the race, is missing, and Orestes ascribes his absence to the unrelenting vengeance which the gods have wreaked upon his unfortunate ancestor. Critics have attempted to explain this apparent incongruity on moral and religious grounds with the help of the traditional account of Tantalus' downfall and expulsion from Olympus.² Kuno Fischer holds that Tantalus was the only member of the race who had sinned against the gods themselves, whereas the crimes of the descendants were committed against men.³ This interpretation scarcely agrees with the conception underlying the play that the gods are conciliatory and ready to pardon the truly repentant sinner.

Frick⁴ suggests that Tantalus' rebellious spirit was still unbroken and that the gods could not pardon him until he had submitted to their higher will. Both these critics have overlooked the important fact that throughout the play Goethe suits his own convenience in his treatment of the ancient story and Greek mythology. He would by no means feel obliged to reproduce for its own sake the

¹ Cf. Evers, *Goethe's Iphigenie auf Tauris*, p. 53.

² Cf. Kuno Fischer, *Goethe's Iphigenie auf Tauris*, pp. 29 ff.

³ Cf. Winkler, *Goethe's Iphigenie auf Tauris*, p. 163.

⁴ Cf. Frick, *Wegweiser durch die klassischen Schuldramen*, V, 6, p. 381.

mythological account of Tantalus' punishment. Iphigenia's conception of her duty toward the barbarous Taurians is not to be explained by adducing Greek ethical ideals but by analyzing Iphigenia's character as it was conceived in Goethe's mind. Similarly the explanation of Orestes' vision of the everlasting punishment of Tantalus should be sought in the analysis of Orestes' character. From this point of view the question becomes psychological, or rather psychopathological, owing to Orestes' abnormal state of mind.

Orestes is subject to intermittent attacks of incipient insanity in the form of hallucinations. Constant brooding over the matricide and intense remorse for the irretrievable act have conjured up before his mind the avenging Furies. They are described as the companions of doubt and remorse, whereas they are really the external projection of these mental states. In one of his lucid intervals, Orestes is brought into the presence of Iphigenia, the priestess of Diana. She approaches him sympathetically, loosens tenderly his bonds, and promises him every assistance within her power. She manifests deep interest in the fate of the house of Agamemnon and urges him to relate the events subsequent to the fall of Troy. The narration of these events culminates in the description of the murder of Clytemnestra and the confession that he, Orestes, is the murderer. The confession is logically motivated in the consoling influence of Iphigenia's personality and the confidence she inspires in Orestes. But the vivid narration of these events has a disastrous effect upon Orestes' mind. Doubt and remorse gain the upper hand. Memory projects the Furies into his present experience. He shows two marked signs of approaching aberration—the conviction of his own defiling influence and the desire for voluntary death. Iphigenia realizes the seriousness of his condition and begins a heroic struggle against the powers of darkness, ending with the eloquent appeal, which is at the same time the theme of the play:

"O wenn vergoss'nen Mutterblutes Stimme
Zur Hölle hinab mit dumpfen Tönen ruft;
Soll nicht der reinen Schwester Segenswort
Hilfreiche Götter von Olympus rufen?"

Orestes' personality is not yet so impaired that he is insensible to this appeal. Iphigenia's words stir the innermost depths of his

being and effect a tremendous emotional upheaval. The long-repressed emotional system of love—love for father, mother, and sister, even the erotic complex rises to the threshold of consciousness and seeks recognition. But Orestes' vision is so clouded that he has no clear conception of what is taking place within him. So great is his confusion that when Iphigenia declares herself to be his sister and attempts to take him in her arms, he misinterprets her words and actions as the blandishments of a wanton Bacchante. It requires the utmost exertion of Iphigenia's superior spiritual force together with a direct and concise presentation of fact to bring him back to a sense of reality. She says:

“Sie ist hier
Die längst verlorne Schwester. Vom Altar
Riss' mich die Götter weg und retteten
Hierher mich in ihr eigenes Heiligtum.
Gefangen bist du, dargestellt zum Opfer,
Und findest in der Priesterin die Schwester.”

Her victory over the powers of darkness is of short duration. Orestes recognizes her as his sister but a pessimistic and incoherent train of thought ascribes her presence at this moment to the vengeance of the gods. The final scene in the tragedy of the house of Atreus is to be the sacrificial murder of Orestes by his sister Iphigenia. His summons to the Furies to witness the welcome spectacle is an indication of approaching mental collapse. But suddenly he notices that Iphigenia is weeping. A great wave of pity and love sweeps over him and he cries:

“Weine nicht! Du hast nicht Schuld
Seit meinen ersten fahren habe ich nichts
Geliebt, wie ich dich lieben könnte, Schwester.”

The repressed emotional system of love at last asserts itself, and for the moment it would seem that the healing of Orestes has been effected by this catharsis of emotion. But the mental and physical strain is too great for him, and he falls unconscious with the words:

“Ja, schwinge deinen Stahl, verschone nicht,
Zerreisse diesen Busen, und eröffne
Den Strömen, die hier siedend, einen Weg.”

The first words uttered by Orestes upon regaining consciousness indicate a completely altered state of mind. He says:

“Noch einen! Reiche mir aus Lethes Fluten den letzten kühlen Becher der Erquickung.”

This relief is twofold, physical and mental. We must assume that he remained unconscious for some time, during Iphigenia's search for Pylades. Deep sleep contributed to the restoration of the physical self and reacted upon the mind. Here Goethe draws from his own experience, in which he had often felt the beneficent effect of sleep upon his spiritual well-being. Orestes' mental relief finds expression in the words:

“Bald ist der Kampf des Lebens aus dem Busen hinweggespült”

and arises from the illusion that he has left behind the world of sorrow and anguish. The importance of this illusion in the healing of Orestes cannot be overemphasized. Orestes falls unconscious in the belief that he is paying the penalty for his unnatural crime. The very fact that he goes through this experience even in delusion must have a purifying and cleansing effect upon his soul. The same device is used by Kleist in *Prinz von Homburg*. The prince is led out blindfolded as if for execution and falls in a swoon, believing that his last hour has struck. The third and most important factor in Orestes' altered state of mind is of course the catharsis of emotion mentioned above. The repressed stream of emotion finds an outlet in a great wave of pity for his sister. Thus much of Iphigenia's “reine Menschlichkeit,” pity and love, is poured into his soul and strikes the keynote for the vision of peace and reconciliation which he now experiences.

Throughout the vision Orestes is practically shut off from sensory contact with the outside world. That he has slight auditory contact with his immediate environment is indicated by the line,

“Welch ein Gelispel höre ich in den Zweigen,”

and this sensory impulse gives direction to his imaginings. The rustling in the trees suggests the presence of the Shades of the lower world who approach to welcome the new arrival. With this beginning his vision assumes the form of a fulfilment of those desires which

have been repressed in his waking moments. He sees the reconciliation of Atreus and Thyestes, of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, and becomes himself a participant in the joyful family reunion. But Orestes remarks that one member of the race, Tantalus, is missing and when he requests the Shades to conduct him into the presence of the revered ancestor, they hesitate and turn away. It does not seem unnatural to ascribe the absence of Tantalus and the recession of the Shades to Orestes' gradual visual awakening with the accompanying increased critical activity of mind. The words addressed to the Shades:

"Ihr scheint zu schauern und euch wegzuwenden"

surely indicate a blending of dream and reality. Coincident with the visual awakening, the dream creatures—the projection of the mental states of peace and reconciliation—vanish before the censorship of mind. As the mind struggles to gain a sense of reality, memory suggests from past experience the traditional account of Tantalus' suffering as an explanation of his absence now, and he asks the question:

"Leidet der Göttergleiche?"

Of equally great importance in bridging over the gap between reality and unreality is the fact that with the memory of the punishment of Tantalus the pleasure complex (peace and reconciliation) departs from him and the pain complex (suffering before his collapse) re-enters consciousness. The way back to reality leads through the identification of the dream self with the suffering self. The fact that Orestes follows the question "Leidet der Göttergleiche?" with the exclamation "Weh mir" would indicate that he transfers the suffering of Tantalus to himself or at least confuses his own suffering with that of his ancestor. The final words of the monologue:

"Es haben die Uebermächtigen
Der Heldenbrust grausame Qualen,
Mit ehrnen Ketten fest aufgeschmiedet,"

although referring primarily to Tantalus may be interpreted as referring indirectly to Orestes. There is no reason to assume that Orestes has a vivid mental picture of the tortures of Tantalus. The words should be taken in a generally descriptive sense.

Of course the predominance of the suffering complex is of short duration. At this critical moment, Orestes is again subjected to the beneficent influence of Iphigenia, who comes on the scene with Pylades. Orestes' visual awakening is not yet complete. He recognizes Iphigenia as his sister and Pylades as his friend, but still imagines that his environment is the lower world. The elegiac tone in which he greets them marks a transitional stage from the sorrowful mood at the close of the vision to the mood of exultant joy when he finally regains consciousness. As he still wavers between reality and unreality, he hears Iphigenia's pathetic prayer to both Diana and Apollo to save all that is dear to her from the raving of insanity. Pylades makes a direct appeal to his wakening senses by calling his attention to the sacred grove and the sunlight, "which does not shine for the dead," and finally summons him, as a man of action, to do his part in the work of rescue and return to Greece. Iphigenia's prayer and Pylades' appeal are sufficient to effect that complete restoration of personality for which the way has been paved by the catharsis of emotion, refreshing sleep, and the imagined atonement. The theme of the play has been described as the influence of "soul upon soul." Applied to Iphigenia and Orestes, this influence consists in the remodeling of Orestes' soul on the pattern of Iphigenia's. Her love and sympathy for him banish despair and remorse which are replaced by love and sympathy for her. But Iphigenia's crowning achievement is the restoration of Orestes' mind of that rockbound faith in the benevolence of the gods, which is the cornerstone of her character.

In thus following step by step the healing of Orestes, it has been my object to show that it is quite unnecessary to assume a supernatural influence and still less that Orestes' vision is a mere symbolic poetic representation of Orestes' spiritual regeneration, but rather that Goethe, with that intuitive knowledge of human nature, which is the inalienable possession of creative genius, clearly indicated the natural mental processes by which this seeming miracle was performed.

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